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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on learner autonomy, noting that learner autonomy is not a matter of institutional mode but of learners' internal attitudes, and that learner autonomy entails an awareness of both self-direction and collaboration between the teacher and students and between students and students. The paper suggests that a teacher's attitude toward his or her students might hold the key to learner autonomy. After describing learner autonomy and learner development, the paper examines several studies that investigated students' attitudes toward the learner's role and classroom learning. Data from focus group interviews, individual interviews, and journals written by English-as-a-Foreign-Language students at a Japanese university indicate that students were aware that they needed to be active as learners, and they seemed to seek interactions with others in their classroom learning. The main problem appeared to be in the gap between their awareness and their actual behavior (their internal perceptions of their need to participate versus their external passivity). (Contains 37 references.) (SM)

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Learner autonomy: learning from the student's voice

Miyuki Usuki

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CLCS Occasional Paper No. 60
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Learner autonomy: learning from the student's voice

Miyuki Usuki

1 What is learner autonomy?

Learner autonomy has been defined as learners taking responsibility for their own learning (Holec 1981). It is my belief that learner responsibility means that learners must become aware of their role as learners. In other words, it denotes learners' internal attitude towards themselves as learners. According to this view, we should be concerned not just with offering learners time, space and freedom, but also with the individual learner's internal flexibility. Learner autonomy does not mean giving over the learning environment to learners, but requires rather that learners are motivated to create their own environment for learning. In such an interpretation, autonomous learning does not necessarily mean a complete shift of instructional mode from teachers to learners. Instead, it can involve various teaching styles or ways of promoting learner autonomy, depending on the context of the classroom. According to Little (1995), the learner's acceptance of responsibility is the basis of learner autonomy, which has both socio-affective and cognitive implications. Dickinson (1996) states that learner autonomy may be internal to the learner without having to be made public. On the other hand, Wenden (1996) argues the importance of students' metacognitive knowledge. She claims that true learner autonomy relates to how students reflect on their learning and realize that they have effective learning opportunities.

In this paper I would like to stress two things: (i) learner autonomy is not a matter of institutional mode but of learners' internal attitude; and (ii) learner autonomy entails an awareness of both self-direction and collaboration between teacher and students, and between student and student. In particular, a teacher's attitude towards his or her students might hold the key to learner autonomy

2 What is learner development?

According to Sinclair (1996/7), learner autonomy can be considered from both a psychological and a political dimension:

2.1 Promoting psychological awareness

Learner development aims to raise learners' awareness of their own learning processes through planning, monitoring, and evaluation (e.g., Wenden 1991). Brookfield (1985) identifies two major aspects of "self-directedness". One is the technique of self-instruction and the other relates to internal changes in consciousness. According to Ridley (1997), what learners say and think about language learning is more important than their cognitive style or other personal characteristics. To put it explicitly, learners should have the opportunity to reflect on the following questions: What are my problems? What do I need to do in order to overcome my problems? How am I doing now? How can I motivate myself? What can I do in the future?

Learner development should promote self-confidence and self-motivation through the language learning process, so that learners come to believe in their own potential. At the same time they need to improve their capacity for self-analysis, and in this it is extremely important for them to get the teacher's support and understanding. Van Lier (1996, p.93) argues that "a teacher cannot simply transmit the sort of skills and attitudes to learning that are required, nor can he or she train learners in the way that recruits are trained to march in step". As Hoffman (1997, p.7) says, "fostering autonomy is not just a matter of learning a few techniques – it involves changing the way in which we relate to learners".

2.2 Promoting political awareness

Widdowson (1987, p.87) states that "the learner really exercises autonomy only within the limits set by teacher authority". Pennycook (1997, p.45), on the other hand, insists on the learner's empowerment: "to become the author of one's world, to become an autonomous language learner and user is not so much a question of learning how to learn as it is a question of learning how to struggle for cultural alternatives". From the perspective of the political dimension of learner autonomy, learner development entails a striving for self-realization, to escape from the limitations of the status quo for both teachers and students. It is the means by which they can become aware of this struggle.

3 The issue of the universality of learner autonomy

3.1 Japanese students' classroom behaviour

Japanese students are stereotypically viewed as passive learners. Moreover, classrooms traditionally emphasize the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Students tend to be viewed as accepting the teacher's authority without question. For example, some teachers working in Japan describe the typical classroom behaviour of Japanese students as follows:

> They are accustomed to a passive and deferential role sitting quietly in classrooms where the teacher determines everything and the students' main objective is not to make mistakes. They expect to be told and to absorb, but not to try things out for themselves. (Doye 1997, p.7)

> [A] typical classroom scene would find the teacher in control, giving explicit directions for every learning activity, and the students passively following those directions. (Robbins 1996, p.179)

> [L]earning is seen as something to be handed down by someone in authority and stored in one's memory. (Purdie, Douglas & Hattie 1996, p.89)

> Nearly all foreign teachers of English complain about the lack of response they get from their students. When the teacher asks a question, no one raises his hand. When students are asked to stand and recite in class, they do so very reluctantly; some even refuse outright. As a result, the pace of the class drags, and students and teacher alike get bored. (McLean 1998, p.46)

Hayashi (1997, p.155), who is one of my colleagues, also identifies the following cultural differences between Japanese and American students' views of classroom behaviours:

> In Japan, there is a great distance between a teacher and a student. To put it another way, teachers are accorded a great deal of respect. This can be seen in the expression "Don't step on one's teacher's shadow; keep three steps behind." Although the students' attitudes toward the teacher have changed somewhat in recent years, this feeling of respect is still prevalent. Ide's (1982; in Hayashi 1997) analysis of the Japanese social rules of politeness explains this point. Ac-

cording to her, Japanese social rules require that one "be polite to a person with power" (p.367). That is, a person performing his role as a professional, such as a professor, has power over a student. Since normally professors are older than their students, this rule is reinforced by another rule, "Be polite in a formal setting" (p.371), which would characterize a classroom setting in Japan.

On the other hand, Nimmannit (1998) draws attention to the role of Japanese cultural traditions: students' passivity is shaped by a cultural virtue such as "Silence is golden".

What then are the views of Japanese students themselves? Here are some extracts (translated into English) from Japanese students' journals, where they comment on their passive attitudes:

> Even if it is a simple question that everyone can answer, nobody tries to say anything. I think the students probably create this kind of atmosphere themselves. In this situation, it is extremely difficult to speak out. In fact, I feel the same. The matter of actively speaking out has become "shameful". Everyone may be aware that it is wrong, though everyone hopes that someone will break the atmosphere. (Student A)

> Talking about my past experiences, Japanese education has been making desperate efforts to complete the school curriculum within the periods decided by the Ministry of Education. Teachers' instructions were apt to be monotonous with no time to spare. It was a one-way relationship between teacher and students, and we spent our education in such an atmosphere. (Student B)

> At primary school, we were told to listen to a person in silence. In addition, when a student tried to speak out, they were scolded. We did not have enough opportunities to give our personal opinion. We have been educated like this. I do not think we can speak out even when asked, still less in a foreign language. We don't have the confidence to be understood. It doesn't help to become silent or passive. And I think this is Japanese culture. (Student C)

3.2 Learner autonomy and cultural influence

In the debate on learner autonomy, one of the major controversial issues is the question of its universality. Crabbe (1996, p.29) claims that "taking charge of learning is a characteristic of the human mind, that we all have the capacity to develop autonomy and although that capacity might not be the same for everyone, as teachers we have to work with individual potential". Riley (1996a) argues that autonomy is a natural and necessary characteristic of human learning, an anthropological universal.

The above statements support the notion of the universality of learner autonomy. However, there are arguments about the inappropriacy in some cultural contexts of instructional modes that promote autonomy (Littlewood 1999). If learner autonomy is a Western value and not suitable, for example, for Asian contexts, its universality can be called into doubt. In this connection, Aoki and Smith (1996) make the claim that "the important issue with regard to learner autonomy is not whether autonomy itself is appropriate in cultural context – but how negotiated versions of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts, in varying ways, in educative counterbalance to more authoritarian, teacher-dominated arrangements".

Pierson (1996) suggests that the stereotype of the passive learner might not be wholly a product of culture, but should not be ignored by the structure of the present colonial education system in Hong Kong. He states further that "a fundamental principle of autonomous learning is that the locus of control is in the hands of the individual learner" (p. 50). Esch (1996) also argues that "cultural differences may not be the main barrier to the promotion of the concept of autonomy in countries with a group-oriented tradition" (p.46). Thomson (1996) claims that people are born self-directed learners, but appear to be influenced by their cultural, educational and developmental background. Pennycook (1997) suggests that promoting autonomy in language learning needs to take into account the cultural contexts of the language learners. In relation to this point, Sinclair (1997) proposes that different cultures and learning contexts require different approaches to promoting learner autonomy.

Personally, I take the view that learner autonomy is a universal characteristic of human beings, and should be promoted for all learners as one of the important goals of language education. I also believe that the main issue in promoting learner autonomy is not a question of learning styles or strategies or indeed of methods of teaching.

What do we need to consider in order to promote learner autonomy? In my view learner development should aim:

- to raise learners' awareness of how they conceptualize their own learning and how they perceive themselves as learners;
- to promote learners' self-motivation for language learning and their awareness of their own learning process;
- to develop learners' self-confidence and awareness of their own progress.

4 Study

4.1 Group interview data: students' attitudes to the learner's role and classroom learning

4.1.1 Method

Together with a colleague I organized focus-group interviews with first-year EFL major students at a private university in Kanazawa, Japan, in February 1998 and 1999. 46 students (with from two to four students in each group and a male : female ratio of 14 : 32) were interviewed in their native language (Japanese) for one hour. The students attended the interview voluntarily. The interviewer was myself, who had never taught them. The interviews took place in a relaxed atmosphere, so that the students could feel free to express themselves. The interviews were taped and transcribed.

4.1.2 Results

Here are some samples (in English translation) of interview data relating to students' awareness of their role and their views on classroom learning. The data will be discussed in 4.1.3 below.

Sample 1 (3 females)
Aiko, Sachi and Junko talk about their role as learners.

Aiko: We should show our personality. We should let other students and the teacher know what sort of person we are. Individual students should open up to others. It may be difficult though.

Sachi: I'm the same as everyone else. We students should act more on our own initiative. We should get what we can. There are various people at university, but most people are not active enough and just attend the class. People who major in English stop trying to improve once they can speak simple English. They seem to decide to stop. I am doing my best, but sometimes feel bored in class. Is it because of the lesson? University study is different from high school study, where there are lots of things to do at home. I can do many things privately outside the classroom. I have many things to do, apart from digesting the lessons.

Junko: We should even stimulate the teacher, so he becomes motivated to teach us. For example, if we ask lots of questions, he may realize that students want to know these kinds of things. In this way, students can stimulate learning. And both teacher and students can create a better atmosphere.

Sachi: I think there are many students who are doing the minimum. We don't realize that all the content of a lesson has potential for use in the future, and there may be lots of useful things for us in our lessons.

Aiko: The biggest problem is that many people have no particular aim.

Junko: Many people don't know clearly what they need to do, so they simply try to get the necessary credits. So, many people think as long as they do the minimum requirement, they will have no problem.

Sachi: On the other hand, there are some people who try to gain as much as possible because they want to improve themselves. Even though they don't have any clear objectives for their future, they try to do their best for the time being.

The group feel that students should have the responsibility to motivate themselves and be aware of their own initiative for their learning. They think that the classroom atmosphere can also be improved through student motivation.

Sample 2 (2 females)

Taeko and Tomoko talk about their preferred instructional methods. They agree that they prefer a communicative classroom atmosphere between teacher and students. Also, neither wants lessons that are simply transmitted one-way from teacher to students.

Taeko: I came to university because I have something that I want to do. So, I wanted lessons that stimulated me more and were different from high school.

Tomoko: We should learn by ourselves. This means that things should not only be taught, but we should also think what to learn and how to learn. So I feel something should be different from our past experience of simply receiving information from the teacher. Maybe we are now allowed to show our desire to learn actively.

Taeko: Even if we want to show our desire, the atmosphere is difficult and we can't do it so easily.

Tomoko: Probably everyone wants to show this. This means someone should break the ice.

Taeko: Yes, yes.

Tomoko: So, whether I can do it or not, at least I feel something should be changed.

Taeko: But are we able to do it?

Tomoko: We can't do it, can we? I wonder why we don't have the courage to do it.

Taeko: Sometimes I feel that it's not good if we stay like this. I feel that we should be allowed to change something.

Tomoko asserts that students themselves should show their attitude and their desire to learn actively. The discussion then turns to address the challenge of the power difference between teacher and students. In relation to this point, both Tomoko and Taeko speak out about the struggle

between their desire and reality.

Sample 3 (2 males)

Researcher: What sort of lessons do you think are not good?

Toshiroo: Passive ones.

Researcher: A teacher, and you only listen? What does a passive lesson mean, if you describe it accurately?

Toshiroo: A teacher says "Do this, do that" and then we have to do it. If the lesson is like that, we can't think on our own. I think we need to have an active attitude – that's my opinion. It's not a bad thing, but ....

Ichiroo: You say passive lessons are no good. But if the person has no wish to learn, it becomes a passive lesson.

.....

Ichiroo: The person who is not passive has probably previewed the lesson and understands what's going on, and so actively participates in the lesson.

Toshiroo: For the person who did a preview, the lesson will focus on something that they couldn't understand on their own. So, this kind of person will listen to the content of what they didn't understand.

Ichiroo: But even they are not passive people. Only if the teacher proceeds in a manner where students have to do what he says, will non-passive people also become passive.

This group also wish to have lessons where there is interaction instead of just listening to the teacher. The word "passive" becomes the topic of discussion. The interesting point is that passive lessons mean not just the teaching-learning mode itself. The students think that what can make a lesson seem passive or non-passive is the attitude of the learner. Also, their discussion suggests that teacher authority may impede learners' motivation to be active learners.

Sample 4 (1 male, 2 females)

Researcher: What is an ideal lesson?

Masaaki: Well – the best is when everyone comes to the class because they want to learn. Not because there are lessons, but because they want to use the lessons. Everyone wants to come, and then we do the lessons. That's the best.

Yasuko: The lessons where everyone listens and is able to think. I don't like boring lessons.

Kazuko: I like the lessons where everyone can participate. We should have an interest in the lesson.

Masaaki: We won't gain anything from lessons in which we come and only receive. Anyway, the ideal lessons are those where we feel we can get something out of them for ourselves. For example, if I think that today I got something out of a lesson, even just one word, I'll feel satisfied.

Yasuko and Kazuko want lessons in which they can participate and do not feel there is a barrier separating teacher and students. On the other hand, Masaaki feels strongly that the most important thing is the learner's own awareness of learning. In his view, it is learner awareness which decides whether lessons become ideal or not.

Sample 5 (1 male, 1 female)

Researcher: What lessons are not good?

Susumu: Well . . . now, we are talking about some lessons that are no good. But I think it's not a fault of the lesson itself. There are students who don't prepare for the lessons and just come to attend the class. Then, when we consider this situation, I'd like to ask them what they think they're doing here. If we want to learn English, it's up to us to do it. Someone might say that the lesson is no good, but if we come for the purpose of studying English, shouldn't we do it even if it's not so enjoyable? It may not be helpful for improving English conversational skills, but probably it is good for TOEIC examinations and also for our future employment opportunities.

Noriko: Bad lessons are . . . there are some students who don't prepare and come to the lesson, and others who prepare and come. In lessons that are no good the teacher adjusts to the students who have not prepared. The teacher has the feeling of giving up and ends up giving all the answers himself or herself. The teacher allows us to be lazy and gives us the answers. Then, gradually, no one wants to prepare for the lesson, and everyone becomes lazy. I think lessons of this kind are no good.

Researcher: What is the role of the learner?

Susumu: If we want to learn, we ourselves should make a start, without being told to do so.

Noriko: What is the role of the learner, I wonder? It's no good if we don't have the desire to learn. So, we should have a good attitude towards study. We have entered university because we wanted to. If we don't have such a feeling, it will turn out like work similar to our high school days. It would become like compulsory education for us.

Susumu emphasizes the learner's responsibility for attending class, while Noriko focuses on the teacher's responsibility to maintain the learners'

motivation; but both are aware of the learners' role in their own learning.

Sample 6 (2 females)

Researcher: What is the role of the learner?

Ichiko: We should at least review what we have learnt, and not neglect what we have done in the past.

Hisae: Teachers are also the same as students, which means they have their own ways of doing things. If students ask various questions, teachers may change their ways of teaching. In this way, students are also advisors for teachers. So, there are two ways (of interaction) between students and teachers.

Ichiko thinks students should not simply take in new knowledge but should check over what they have learnt. Hisae suggests that teachers and students should interact with one another to improve their teaching and learning.

Sample 7 (3 females)

Researcher: What is an ideal lesson?

Kumiko: The classes I like best are those where there are many students who have the same purpose as I have and are motivated to learn.

Yukari: In addition, I think the best class is one where we can communicate with the teacher.

Yoshimi: If the students are motivated or not is important. If someone chatters in the class, I feel frustrated and can't concentrate on the topic. If that happens, I'll feel bad all day.

Kumiko: If someone chatters or does something different, later that person will have problems. Some teachers don't tell them to stop chattering. But I'd like the teacher to scold the students.

Researcher: So, the ideal lesson depends on the people who make up the class?

Kumiko: Yes, yes.

Yoshimi: This is one reason. Also, whether we can communicate with the teacher or not is also important.

Yukari: Depending on the teacher.

Yoshimi: If the teacher doesn't want to teach us, it's hard for us to ask him. One day, one of the teachers said to us, "If you don't understand, there's no way out of it." So I can't ask him any more, even if I have problems. He may think that such a thing is just beyond me. If we are forced to accept only what the teacher thinks, we must simply shut up.

Kumiko, Yukari and Yoshimi agree that students are responsible for the learning atmosphere in the classroom, and that teachers should be aware of the need to establish a good relationship with their students.

Sample 8 (1 male, 3 females)

Mari, Michiko, Kazuhiro and Rika discuss their thoughts on classroom learning and the role of the learner.

Mari: The learner's role is to attend class with the motivation to learn more.

Michiko: If students are motivated to learn, teachers may also be motivated to teach. So, together with teachers, we students should accept our own role in stimulating the class, and show our motivation by, for example, asking questions in class. The most important point is that we are motivated.

Kazuhiro: I'd like it if we could expect our teachers to be good advisors when we have problems with continuing our studies, not only as far as English is concerned. If we know that teachers think about their students, we feel happy.

Michiko: There should be no barriers between students and teachers.

Mari: It's difficult to talk with teachers.

Rika: We should make use of opportunities to stimulate one another – teachers and students.

Kazuhiro: There are some lessons which are not so interesting, and we don't like lessons which don't interest us. But any lesson can have some useful points. There is always something that we can use to improve ourselves. I believe that we should not completely hate or reject a class. Teachers try their best to teach us.

Michiko: There are no lessons which are 100 % no good, are there?

Mari: No. The point is our motivation.

Michiko: But there are teachers who never try to change, even though they know our feelings. I understand teachers have their own ways, but students don't follow them. I would like teachers not to talk just about their specialist subject. Instead, they should concern themselves with what and how students learn, and with what students are interested in.

Rika: One-way lessons in which teachers talk. Lessons of this kind make it difficult for students to ask questions in class. Even if we wish to make lessons more interesting, it's hard in this kind of situation.

Mari: Different answers may be possible, but in this kind of class we think that we need to follow what the teacher says.

Michiko: We're not getting anywhere. We keep coming back to the same point.

Mari: Maybe it's possible to apply this to various things.

Michiko: Teachers also have their plans. So, they must follow their plans.

Mari: On to the next thing, then the next, like this, teachers just keep on going ahead. So we have to follow. Even if we have questions, it's hard to stop the lesson in mid-stream and ask a question.

Kazuhiro: The atmosphere is too quiet.

Michiko: If we talk, it seems strange. That's what we feel.

Mari: We're shy.

Michiko: If we express our opinions, it seems to be no good. We feel that we shouldn't interrupt.

Kazuhiro: If someone speaks out, that person will stand out.

Mari: We're too quiet!

Michiko: We can't open our mouths.

Kazuhiko: I want to ask questions, and I also want teachers to answer me.

Mari: So do I. But everyone is too quiet, so I don't have a chance to do this.

Michiko: I don't know why we're so quiet.

Rika: We don't know people around us very well. We don't know the class members very well.

Mari: Because there is a clear distinction between the teacher and students.

Kazuhiko: The important thing is encouragement. If the teacher says, "Your essay was very impressive", then I would like to write an even better one next time and surprise him. So I will be more motivated. I believe communication between teachers and students is extremely important.

The students in this group seem to be aware that they have the responsibility to motivate themselves. At the same time, however, they express a need for understanding on the part of the teacher.

4.1.3 Discussion

As previously noted, Japanese students are typically viewed as passive learners. In this set of interviews, however, the students expressed their feelings, and talked about their ideas regarding classroom learning. In the above extracts the students seem to be aware that students and teachers need to make an effort to change the process of classroom learning. They express a need for interaction between teacher and students. Also, they seem to think the student's role should be that of active learner and the teacher's role that of facilitator or advisor. Their behav-

iour in the classroom is probably affected by the atmosphere, which may be influenced by how the teacher relates to the students and also by how students relate to one another. It is possible that there is a difference between the real insights these students have and the way they behave in the classroom. Learner autonomy should be concerned not only with self-directedness, but also with learner awareness in creating a supportive and collaborative classroom atmosphere.

Another point I would like to emphasize is that the teacher's attitude could hold the key to learner autonomy. In the past, I too had a stereotypical view of Japanese students' classroom behaviour. I believed that students had grown accustomed to teacher authority and spoonfed education, and that therefore they preferred to be told what to do by their teacher and to accept everything. For this reason, I had always assumed that the students needed to be trained to change their attitudes. However, after conducting the focus group interviews, I realized that I was unconsciously expecting them to be dependent students. Instead of trusting in their potential, I saw them in a negative light because I assumed that they were not aware of their responsibility for their own learning and that therefore I had to change them.

Cotterall (1998) discusses the importance of the attitude of teachers towards their students. She also emphasizes the crucial role of the learner-teacher relationship for fostering learner autonomy. Barry and King (1998) insist that teachers' expectations about their students largely influence their passivity. In my opinion, learner development should promote learners' self-confidence and self-motivation through the language learning process in order to encourage them to believe in their own potential. At the same time, it is extremely important for students to get the teacher's support and understanding. The teacher's role should include making an effort to understand the learners' perspectives, and trust in their students' potential.

Here, I would like to introduce some extracts (in English translation) from students' comments on dialogue journal interaction with their teacher.

> I worried a lot about my English class. But in my journal I have a place where I can express myself. I feel I had a little bit of a negative attitude, but I think I have become more positive now.
>
> Journal writing was the best aspect of this class. Because the teacher tried to listen to our opinions, I felt that I was not forced to study. Instead, I felt that I attended the class for my own sake. I would like to continue my journal writing.
>
> I could personally ask questions on how to learn, etc., even though I could not ask

questions in the class. Also, the classroom lessons have improved because the teacher considered our opinions when planning her lessons.

Puchta (1999) states: "our students' negative and positive beliefs can be an enormous influence on the success of their learning. Not only the students' beliefs, but also those of the teachers can have a strong systemic influence on the students' success" (p.257). He subsequently (p.259) cites Diana Whitmore's words (1986, p.216):

> It is not what we do with our students, it is who we are. No great teaching method will be enough, if we ourselves are not at home. We are all teachers and learners. Educators can educate only if they are willing to put themselves into question as well.

4.2 A case study: one example of an autonomous learner's self-directedness

4.2.1 Method

What do we have to do to promote learner autonomy? In an attempt to answer this question, a student identified as an autonomous learner was singled out for interview. The retrospective interview was taperecorded and transcribed, then analysed by focusing on how the learner thinks about her own learning, with the purpose of shedding light on aspects of learner autonomy.

Fumiko is a fourth-year student major in English at a private university in Kanazawa, Japan. She started learning English at junior high school in Japan and continued at high school. She was taught by a Japanese teacher of English. Fumiko's experience of learning English at school was much the same as that of most students in Japan. She went to New Zealand for four weeks in her second year at university, as part of her course. With the exception of these four weeks, she has never been outside Japan. I have known her since she was a first-year student, when I noticed her practising reading English or listening to tapes nearly every day. I also noted that she often looked for opportunities to talk with native English teachers. I had a short private talk with her just before her first trip abroad. At that time, she was a second-year student. I was impressed with her because her English was so good, but I heard she had never been overseas. So I wanted to know more about her.

Fumiko's TOEIC score was more than 900 points in November 1998. This showed an increase of 375 points over her score in her first year (in April 1996). By way of comparison, the mean TOEIC score among fourth-years (approximately 190 students in number) is around 500, while the

mean increase in scores within this group is about 150. Given Fumiko's achievement and improvement, she is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding students in the university.

I hoped that a retrospective interview might uncover Fumiko's own perspectives on her learning of English. In advance of the interview she was informed of its purpose but not of the specific questions to be asked. The interview was conducted in English, and the extracts given below are from the original transcription, with no corrections made.

4.2.2 Findings

The extracts from the interview with Fumiko are interspersed with commentaries. There is further discussion in 4.2.3 below.

> Interviewer: How have you been trying to improve your English outside class?
>
> Fumiko: I read at least one article every day. And I read *Time* to get used to longer passage. Secondly, I try to get used to natural speed English. I watch CNN news. And, thirdly, I read Japanese newspaper, every day. In my opinion, the broader our knowledge is, the better we understand when I get information in English. Fourth, I take examinations like TOEIC, TOEFL, and EIKEN, and so on.

Fumiko has her own learning strategies for improving her English. She identifies the cognitive strategies of reading and listening, and also the metacognitive strategies (Oxford 1990) of daily activity planning and self-evaluation. Moreover, she seems to be aware of the importance of background knowledge for the learning of English. In this sense, she has metacognitive awareness.

> Interviewer: What sorts of things influence your language learning?
>
> Fumiko: First, I'm very interested in things outside of Japan. So, I wanted to know about different people, different countries and cultures. In one way to know about different countries is exchange letters with people who live in those countries. So, I started to make penpals. I learned how to write in English by writing letters in English. When I was a junior high school student, I every day come home and saw the mail box if there was a letter from overseas. And I found one, I felt with gratitude. Second, I played the piano and violin. I have a good ear for sound, I guess. This is why I am able to pick up English pronunciation very quickly. Thirdly, I learned by heart all the English dialogues in the English textbook used in junior high school as I was told by my English teacher. I think it is very beneficial, not only we can understand the basic grammar, but also we can use expressions in conversation. My basic of my English is what I learned in a junior high school.

These reflections suggest that Fumiko's motivation is of the type "interest in foreign languages and cultures" (Dörnyei 1994). To satisfy this

motivation she found herself English-speaking penpals, and was able as a result to use English as a medium of communication. On the other hand, she also emphasizes the strategy of memorization, a reflection perhaps of her Japaneseness, or her Japanese teacher's strong influence. What is interesting is that Fumiko relates her musical skills to her English pronunciation skills. In this respect, she shows self-confidence as well as something of her uniqueness.

Interviewer: How do you connect inside and outside classroom learning?

Fumiko: I prepare for the class and review the class. So together make complete class.

Fumiko considers her classroom learning as only part of her learning. It forms the core of her learning and is supplemented by learning outside the classroom. She insists that learning inside and outside the classroom cannot be separated and together they constitute her present learning.

Interviewer: On what occasions do you feel frustrated?

Fumiko: My TOEIC scores, EIKEN scores didn't improve at all, I feel frustration. But when I feel frustration I try to believe in myself. I believe in myself, keep trying very hard. No change. If I keep trying, I will progress. It's very difficult, but even if I don't concentrate on my studies, I use the time to study English. I try. Keep trying.

Fumiko is a reflective learner: she evaluates her progress, and if she finds no improvement, she feels frustrated. This is purely a matter for herself. She compares her past ability to her present ability. It is not a matter of comparison with others. In addition, she is very conscious about time. She also has a positive belief in her ability to learn. This belief seems to lead her to progress in learning and strongly supports her independence.

Interviewer: What is your role inside the classroom?

Fumiko: What I need to do is keep trying as a learner. English is – studying English is my purpose and at the same time, English is the means of communication. So one goal as a learner is to improve my English.

To get everything from the class, from the teacher. To get everything in that class. To take full advantage of the class.

Her thinking is self-directed. She is aware of her responsibility as a learner to motivate herself to learn. She thinks the most important thing is not the given environment but that she should make her own environment suit her learning. She insists that what matters is the learner himself or herself, rather than the style or method of classroom learning.

Interviewer: What is the role of the teacher?

Fumiko: To provide students with appropriate textbook and timely advice according to their English level.

She thinks the role of the teacher is to give appropriate information and advice.

Interviewer: What is classroom learning?

Fumiko: Helping each other, I realize what other people do, or think. I can get ideas from the class that I can't think of by myself.

She considers classroom learning as an opportunity for interaction with others. She is aware of learning from her social relationship with others.

Interviewer: What do you think of yourself as a learner?

Fumiko: I think myself as an ideal learner because I'm studying the subject what I'm interested in. There is a saying what you like you will do well. I'm practising that saying.

Interviewer: What is language learning for you?

Fumiko: For me, language is a means of communication. So, what the most important thing is what I can do, using the language. So, I'm trying to acquire English as a means of communication.

Interviewer: How do you motivate yourself?

Fumiko: I set a goal. As I said before, energy gravitate towards clear goals. Even if I cannot achieve that goal, I will progress, I guess.

Interviewer: Do you have an ability to achieve your goal?

Fumiko: If I have a strong will to make my dream come true, I will, I have, yes.

She has a particular goal in mind. She reflects on exactly what she wants to do and what she can do. She questions herself and also tries to think in a flexible way. This attitude seems to be the basis of her learning and thinking. As previously indicated, she has a positive belief in her capability.

4.2.3 Discussion

What can we learn from the case of Fumiko? I would like to consider the following kinds of learner thoughts as illustrating learner autonomy:

- own language learning strategies
- metacognitive awareness
- beliefs about language learning
- self-confidence
- self-reflection: comparing the present self with the past self

- self-directedness: awareness of learner responsibility and self-motivation
- connecting learning inside and outside the classroom
- awareness of interaction with others

Discussing self-access language learning, Riley (1996b, p.253) identifies four constitutive elements: "self", "access", "language" and "learning". In my view, how the learner thinks about the self is the most important factor in relation to learner autonomy.

At the 1999 IATEFL Conference in Edinburgh, Herbert Puchta gave a plenary talk on the significant influence of learners' beliefs about capabilities and beliefs about identity. Bandura (1997) discusses this in terms of "self-efficacy theory". Drawing on his own empirical findings he describes how a person's belief in his or her capabilities will affect subsequent behaviour and performance. In his plenary talk Puchta stressed that a student who has positive beliefs will have a better basis for success than someone who has not. Puchta also emphasized the significant influence of the teacher's beliefs and expectations on the students' learning and their positive or negative beliefs.

Fumiko's case is of course one example. But from this case we can see learner autonomy and autonomous learning from a different angle. In the case of Fumiko, learner autonomy can exist in her mind whatever the situation is.

I approached Fumiko again for a second taperecorded interview. This time, however, the interview was prepared for the purpose of motivating the first year students. After listening to the tape, the students made comments. Although 5 students had no comments, 70 out of 75 students expressed their positive feelings, such as "I want to be like her in my fourth year", "I will do my best like her", "I need to make more of an effort", or "I think I should also be able to be like her".

Here are some more of their comments (translated into English).

> She has an awareness of English as her life-long learning and as part of her body. How about me? I still feel as though I am being forced to study. I think that is the big difference.
>
> When I listened to the tape I honestly thought "I can't do it like her". I thought she really liked English. Of course, I also like it very much, but I have realized that this kind of feeling alone can't produce a better outcome. I would like to make the effort but I don't want to be defeated.
>
> I agree with what she said but I think that I have my own way and, maybe, I can find other better ways. I need to try and find one by myself.
>
> I know her. Among my seniors, I respect her the most. When she sees me, she starts

talking to me in English. Whenever I see her, she is reading newspapers, or talking with professors, or listening to the CNN news with headphones. Anyway, she is a wonderful person.

In the words of Marie-Christine Press (1996, p.251):

> learner autonomy is considered a desirable aim. But increasing evidence of different cultural expectations requires a more sensitive interpretation of the cultural background to make informed choices as to the forms of learning which suit them best. University courses can profitably exploit the time when newly enrolled students start to study in a different environment, to facilitate self-reflection and explore the benefits of learner autonomy, meaning not so much working on one's own as developing a personal sense of direction and responsibility for one's learning. This aim is more likely to be achieved by students who have gained some understanding of their own culturally-influenced attitudes and of how they interact with the learning environment.

4.3 From open-ended questionnaires: the role of the learner; the role of the classroom

4.3.1 The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to find out students' thoughts about both their own role as a learner and the role of classroom learning.

4.3.2 The informants

The data were taken from 52 Japanese EFL major students in a private university in Kanazawa, Japan, in October 1998:

26 first year students (male : female = 8 : 18)
26 second year students (male : female = 4 : 22)
Total 52 (male : female = 12 : 40)

4.3.3 Data collection method

The students were asked to write freely in their journal about the role of the learner and the role of the classroom. Their journals were written in Japanese and then translated into English. The 52 transcriptions were compared and common themes were categorized. Percentages were calculated, according to the frequency of the themes in the data.

4.3.4 Results: the role of the learner

The data set was coded and divided into eight groups as follows:

Self-direction [40.4%]

- learning by myself
- being always aware of absorbing something actively
- not only receiving lessons passively
- doing whatever I can do, by myself
- having (showing) my own desire, motivation and attitude to learn for myself
- being autonomous (independence)
- carrying on what I need to do
- obtaining something by myself

Seeking opportunities for self-growth [14.9%]

- deepening my comprehension skills
- broadening my view
- internationalizing myself
- drawing on my ability which stays unconsciously inside myself
- having an interest in different cultures

Seeking learning opportunities [14.9%]

- having opportunities to talk and learn naturally
- remembering words step by step

Being aware of objectives and goal setting [8.5%]

- being aware of the purpose of learning
- proceeding with a goal of learning

Self-monitoring [6.4%]

- finding out what I do not know
- getting rid of my laziness
- realizing that my role is to study
- studying at a suitable level for me
- concentrating

Self-motivation [4.3%]

- enjoying learning

- always questioning something with curiosity
- making an effort to learn enjoyably
- trying to learn seriously

Environmental structuring [2.1%]

- making the environment conducive to participating actively

Getting information [2.1%]

- listening to the teachers talking

No response [6.4%]

Sample extracts from students' journals:

Until I was told to write in my journal, I honestly had never thought about my role. I only thought I should study hard. So when I try to write about my role, it is not so easy. I am ashamed of myself. Today, it is not difficult to go abroad, compared with the past. Therefore, we can hear information from the world straightaway. So, by learning the language, we can directly touch the world and I can obtain the information more accurately. Also, if I can improve my language skills, it becomes possible to connect myself to the world. Then I will be able to expand my perceptions as a whole. I cannot put my ideas into shape, but one thing I can say is that I would like to think that learning the language is important in my daily life.

When we learn English, the most important thing is to enjoy it. Whatever we learn, enjoyment is important. I would like to enjoy studying English.

When I learn, I would like to learn properly. Not doing things half way, or not just being taught by teachers. I would like to attend the lessons with the awareness of learning for myself. To attend the lessons by taking responsibility on our own. It has no meaning if we do only what teachers say. It is our role as learners to seize something by ourselves.

In my opinion, the learner's role is to continue to investigate. We always need to ask something and try to make efforts to know something.

I think that our role as learners is to take responsibility for our own learning. Even if we are given a good environment or good opportunities around us, we will not be able to make the best use of the conditions, if we do not want to do something by ourselves. Therefore, we cannot put the blame on someone else for our lack of improvement.

The environment is surely important but we need to get the power on our own to absorb things which are given. On this point, I think it is important to let us be re-

sponsible on our own.

It is up to me alone to devise a way to study in order to improve my school marks or keep my skills up. Besides, as it is said, "many a little, makes a mickle", I need to do it step by step. I am a weak-willed person, so it is very difficult for me to continue it. But it is something that I must do.

I think we should do whatever we can do, on our own and without the classroom. Then we should identify what we couldn't understand from our individual work.

My experience overseas has led me to reflect on my previous attitude. Students should not learn with a passive attitude, but independently. It is up to us whether we can acquire things that we have learnt at each lesson.

4.3.5 Results: the role of the classroom

The data set was divided into eight groups as follows:

Interdependence [41.5%]

- stimulating one another
- sharing opinions with one another
- helping one another
- learning together and competing with one another in order to develop our ability (seeing others as rivals)
- listening to other people's opinions
- people who have the same purpose gather together and find out one another's thoughts and opinions

Developing one's own learning [12.2%]

- being recognized that I am there
- developing my own learning at home
- having one's own opinion

Discovery [9.8%]

- discovering various things from contact with associations and groups
- expanding my perspectives
- looking from various angles

Organizing [7.3%]

- devising my own way of studying (preview – lessons – review)
- setting myself standards
- creating an atmosphere for learning

Getting new things [4.9%]

- absorbing knowledge
- learning new things
- getting information
- not talking in class

Getting support and help [4.9%]

- getting support for learning
- developing ways of co-operating with one another
- getting help for individual study

Getting learning opportunities [4.9%]

- getting opportunities for learning
- getting something that interests me

Solving problems [2.4%]

- checking answers
- presenting my own learning outcomes
- solving what I could not understand

No response [12.1%]

Sample extracts from students' journals:

Classroom learning is important. For sure, there are good things and bad things depending on the environment, but in my opinion it is not appropriate to point out only bad things. In previous lessons, the teacher read class members' journals. The point is, in other words, people who have the same purpose of learning the language get together and hear their thoughts or feelings.

For me, this is nothing more than being appreciated. When I am doing language study, sometimes I feel I have been improving, and sometimes I feel I have not been improving at all, regardless of my effort. Of course, this kind of thing is common for everyone. So, when people have such predicaments, I can hear about what sort of feelings they have, and how they overcome them, etc. It becomes my support. Therefore, classroom learning is needed to develop our own skills. So we usually want to get good lessons. But not only this, there are lots of things we need to learn. I think I would like to do everything with positive thinking.

In English lessons, we can interact with native teachers or persons who have more knowledge. In this way, I think we can enjoy our learning differently rather than studying on our own.

By studying with people in the class, I can hear other people's opinions, or I can have opportunities to talk with them. Sometimes I discover new things that I would never find out by myself. Also it is good stimulation to have rivals, as I am given strength to do my best. For the above reasons, classroom learning is necessary for me.

It is important to have the feeling that I exist in the class.

Basically, the classroom is the place where we gain skills to develop our own learning at home.

In my opinion, the classroom is the place for presenting our own learning outcomes and also the place for learning new things. If we know how to take advantage of lessons, we will spend the time profitably; otherwise, it is just wasting our time.

I have changed my thinking about classroom learning, compared with my high school days. That is because one teacher said, "the classroom is the place for presenting individuals' thoughts and learning outcomes, and it is the place for influencing each other." Therefore, if each student does not prepare for the lesson, it is meaningless. Previously, I expected to be taught, but now I realize it is different at university. In my opinion, if each person's attitude towards learning changes, the whole class may be influenced and changed.

School lessons give only a little help in learning. Learners themselves need to have the will to proceed by themselves.

Students should be motivated to learn, know the meaning of learning and enjoy learning. The classroom is the place where people get together. Therefore, members of the class should cooperate with each other and expand their own ideas by getting other people's ideas. The present problem of classroom learning is passivity and a kind of mechanical learning. Even if there are various ideas, we are managed by the specific ones.

Lessons are only one part of learning. Students' can also preview and review lessons on their own. For this reason, they need to make an effort in relation to three things: preview – lessons – review.

I think it does not always hold true that all material given by teachers is interesting. So, if we find and try interesting things for ourselves from the given materials, we will improve.

5 Summary discussion

There seems to be a gap between learners' external passivity and their internal perceptions. Learner training often concerns raising learners' awareness of their own learning process or teaching effective strategies. However, I feel that there are more important things to consider for learner development. The learners might know what they should do, but the biggest problem for them could be a psychological barrier. The survey

study by Keim et. al. (1996) on Japanese students' attitudes and beliefs about foreign language learning also supports this point. Keim et. al. are convinced that there exists a real divergence between students' awareness of new strategies and their actual behaviour in class. In addition, attempts to elicit more information from students through journal writing revealed that "fear and insecurity play a significant role in the way students behave in class, even though they genuinely wish to improve their English and, in some cases, would actually like to behave differently"(p. 99). This statement supports the findings reported in the present study.

In order for students to realize their desire to be active participants, both teacher and students need to be aware of their responsibility to build a conducive classroom atmosphere. Understanding and effort are needed from both parties for good classroom learning. In this respect, learner development can be considered as giving students opportunities to think about their struggles and developing their awareness of their responsibility as learners.

6 Conclusion

The students described in this paper seem to be aware that they need to be active as learners. Also, they seem to seek interactions with others in their classroom learning. The biggest problem may exist in the gap between their awareness and their actual behaviour. There seems to be a difference between what they think and what they really do.

In my opinion, this problem will not be solved by simply encouraging a change in the students' learning styles or strategies. What is needed in order to promote real learner autonomy? Strategy training, learner training for awareness-raising, group work or project work settings. Are they really a solution in the Japanese classroom context? The students may change their behaviour or attitudes depending on the situations: in a particular setting, they can be active learners; in other situations, they remain passive. The point is that the students' external behaviour may be different from their real insights. In the Japanese context, what is the best way to promote learner autonomy? In general, Japanese students do not seem to have opportunities to think and talk about their role as learners. The students are expected to follow the teachers' directions correctly and have got used to doing their best to meet such expectations. At this point, it might be worth asking the students what they really think about themselves.

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